

The causal power of social structures

Emergence, Structure, and Agency

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6 Normative Institutions

This chapter develops and justifies one of the central arguments of this book: that social structure is best understood as the causal powers of social groups.¹ It does so by focusing on one of the many possible types of social structure, one that has played a central role in sociological debates: normative social institutions. The chapter examines in some detail how such institutions are produced by the interactions between members of a specific type of social group, a type of group I shall call *norm circles*. Normative social institutions, it will argue, are an emergent causal power of norm circles.

This chapter is concerned with identifying the mechanism responsible for normative social institutions and thus with *retroduction*. It therefore abstracts from the many complex ways in which this mechanism interacts with others in the social world, including for example the important role played by various forms of social power in the workings of many normative institutions. Nor does it cover the ways in which institutions are implicated in the mechanisms of other types of social structure, or say much about the morphogenetic histories of institutions. The analysis of institutions developed here, then, is not intended as a complete account of how they work, which would certainly need to address all of these further issues. Rather, it is intended as an ontological building block that may then be combined with others to construct a fuller explanation of actual institutions and social events. The following chapter will show, for example, how institutions are implicated in the more complex ontological structure of organisations and chapter eight will examine how their causal powers interact with others in the determination of actual events.

Conventional sociological accounts of normative institutions, discussed briefly in the first part of the chapter, have tended to assume that normativity is produced by *society*, but

¹ Hodgson has made a similar point: ‘Social structures are essentially groups of interacting social individuals, possibly including social positions, and with emergent properties resulting from this interaction’ (Hodgson 2007: 221).

they have rarely been precise in defining the concept of *society*. It is just this sort of ontological vagueness that the method described in chapter four is designed to problematise and this chapter is the outcome of applying that method to the question of normativity. It thus seeks to identify the precise social entities responsible for the causal influence of normative institutions and the mechanisms by which they acquire these powers, connecting the argument up to an understanding of the lower level parts that combine in these mechanisms – in other words, to the account of agency offered in the previous chapter.

These mechanisms are examined in detail in the central sections of the chapter, which introduce the concept of norm circles, examine different but complementary ways of understanding their boundaries and consider the implications of one of their most significant characteristics: their potential for intersectionality. Normative intersectionality arises when an individual is part of multiple distinct norm circles that have different boundaries. This appears to be increasingly common in contemporary societies and is an important factor in explaining normative change, which is examined in the penultimate section.

The final section of the chapter uses the account of normativity developed in these central sections to ground a critique of the ontology implicit in the work of Anthony Giddens on social structure. While this critique complements that made by Margaret Archer and other realists, it also recognises that at the level of theory, as opposed to ontology, structuration theory may be compatible with a realist understanding of structure.

Theories of Social Institutions

The Durkheimian sociological tradition invokes the concept of social structure – or ‘social facts’ – to explain normative social practices. By *normative social practices* I mean regularised practices encouraged by dispositions or beliefs about appropriate ways of behaving that are shared by a group of people. There is a vast range of such practices, including those sanctioned by legal systems (e.g. ‘you must drive on the right hand side of the road’), religious belief (e.g. ‘you must not eat pork’), rule systems (e.g. ‘you may only move the king one square at a time, in any direction’) or cultures (e.g. ‘on meeting someone, you

should shake their right hand'). These various types of rules (or their tacit equivalent, in which the practice is not understood or transmitted in explicitly verbal terms), may be called *norms*.

The social structures that are responsible for normative social practices are generally referred to in the sociological literature as *social institutions*.² The concept of *social institution*, however, is almost as diverse in its referents as the concept of *social structure* (discussed in chapter four). The *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, for example, begins its definition: 'an established order comprising rule-bound and standardized behaviour patterns. The term is widely acknowledged to be used in a variety of ways, and hence often ambiguously. *Social institution* refers to arrangements involving large numbers of people whose behaviour is guided by *norms* and *roles*' (Jary and Jary 2000: 302).

Despite its acknowledgement of conceptual diversity, this definition leans towards the idea that social institutions are to be identified with patterns of behaviour, and thus represents an example of what was called in chapter four structure-as-empirical-regularity. Empirical regularities in themselves, however, are not causes but effects and so, if social institutions are to play a causal role, they must be something more than such regularities.

The commonest strategy in the literature is to ascribe the causal role to norms themselves. There are two varieties of this strategy, both of which can be traced back to Durkheim: one that sees norms as individual representations and one that sees them as collective representations. Both accounts assume that individuals enact particular practices because of the particular normative beliefs they hold and that the standardisation of these

² In accepting that these *are* social structures, I diverge from some other realists. Fleetwood, for example, has suggested that we should exclude institutions from our definition of social structures (Fleetwood 2008), and Archer sees institutions as culture rather than structure (personal communication). Fleetwood's argument seems to me to obscure the important commonality that institutions have with other forms of social structure: they arise from interactions within groups of people and are causal powers of such groups. I do agree that institutions are cultural, and indeed that *culture* and *normative institutions* are more or less synonymous terms, but for the same reason again I see culture as a type of social structure. We can nevertheless continue to distinguish between institutions and other forms of structure, as we can indeed between different institutions, and thus my argument does not constitute a *conflation* of structure and culture. I have discussed the ontology of culture in more depth in (Elder-Vass 2010).

practices arises at least in part from the fact that the corresponding normative beliefs are shared by members of the cultural community concerned. However, there are two distinct ways of theorizing this causal role. The first argues that these normative beliefs are only causally effective as items of knowledge or belief held by individual human agents. The second, however, argues that it is not individual normative beliefs but collective ones that are causally effective here: that individual-level normative beliefs, related to each other in the sense of being shared over a certain community, form the parts of a *collective representation*, to use Durkheim's phrase, and that it is this collective representation that is causally effective. One could argue, for example, that the *commonality* of social practices cannot be explained by the causal effects of individual norms and values, but only by the commonality of those norms and values across the community, and hence that it is the collective norm or value that produces *standardized* behaviour and not the individual one.

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory seems ambivalent with regard to this question. He claims not only that structure 'makes it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist' but also that it 'exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces' (Giddens 1984: 17). Thus, on the one hand, he claims that structure makes possible the commonality of practices, which would appear to require a quasi-Durkheimian notion of structure as something that is wider than the beliefs of individual human beings. This is the view that also seems implicit when he defines structure as 'rules and resources, organized as properties of *social systems*' (Giddens 1979: 66, emphasis added). Yet on the other hand he insists that structure exists only as instantiations in the practices and minds of individual human beings, and thus denies the existence of collective representations as such (Giddens 1984: 25-6).

Reading Giddens' structuration theory as an account of the structure of institutions seems to leave us with a contradiction. He wants norms and values simultaneously to be more widely binding than their individual instantiations because of their collective character, but also nothing more than their individual instantiations in ontological terms. The former depends upon accepting the claim that 'collective representations' have a causal effect in their

own right, while the latter depends upon denying it. And each of these claims seems to depend upon a different way of understanding what a ‘collective representation’ really is: in the first case, there seems to be an implication that collectives as such can *have* representations, whereas in the second, collective representations are nothing more than a group of individual representations that happen to be similar.

Yet Giddens’ ambivalence is perhaps understandable, as neither of these understandings seems satisfactory. On the one hand, it seems necessary to have a mind or at least a brain to form a representation and collectives as such don’t have them, only individuals do.³ On the other, the second option does not seem to provide an explanation of the commonality of practices at all. Some sort of collective pressure is required if we are to provide an explanation of the similarity between the social practices of different people. But this leads to a further challenge: what is the collective that exerts this pressure?

From the beginning, Durkheim linked social facts to the concept of *society*, (e.g. Durkheim 1964 [1894]: 13). And by the time of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he clearly ascribes the causal capacity to exert normative influence to society as a whole:

Society requires us to become its servants, forgetting our own interests... Thus we are constantly forced to submit to rules of thought and behaviour that we have neither devised nor desired... Society speaks through the mouth of those who affirm them in our presence: when we hear them, we hear society speak, and the collective voice has a resonance that a single voice cannot have (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 154-6).

Although it sometimes seems that for Durkheim the society that influences us is a monolithic one, this is only true of his account of *mechanical solidarity* in pre-modern societies, which he sees as normatively homogeneous, with a large collective element in each individual’s moral consciousness. In modern societies, characterised by *organic solidarity*, this collective element declines with the growth of occupation-specific normative collectivities, each with its own set of norms (Durkheim 1984 [1893]). And at times,

³ Durkheim’s emergentism has often been criticized on the grounds that it seems to attribute subjectivity to groups (e.g. Catlin 1964: xiv) (and see Lopez and Scott 2000: 108-9, en 2).

Durkheim equates the concept of *society* with lower level social groupings such as religious communities and families (Durkheim 1952 [1897]: 170-71).

Nevertheless, conceptions of social structure as the power of whole societies remain influential. In the *Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*, for example, we read: ‘In social structure the parts are relationships among persons and the organized body of the parts may be considered to be coincident with the society as a whole’ (Heer 2003). But such statements demand some clarity about what a *society* actually is; and it is often suggested that in this tradition societies are assumed to map onto nation states (e.g. Sayer 2000: 108). States themselves usually have well-defined boundaries and memberships, but the belief that these boundaries are congruent with those of *societies* is coming to seem increasingly untenable. Alongside states there are many potentially cross-cutting social systems or collectivities that follow different boundaries, or none at all (Walby 2005) and one consequence of globalisation is that less and less collectivities are coterminous with states. But many, such as multinational corporations, religions and families, have never been so, and many of these surely play important roles in the maintenance of normative institutions.

One response amongst theorists of social structure has been to eliminate or at least attenuate the link from structure to society. Giddens, for example, continues to work with the concept of society, but defines it in much more tentative terms, as clusterings of institutions (Giddens 1984: 164). But this clustering does not entail that all institutions are congruent with particular societies: ‘I take it to be one of the main features of structuration theory that the extension and “closure” of societies across space and time is regarded as problematic’ (Giddens 1984: 165). In his structuration theory, ‘structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents’ (Giddens 1984: 17). There is little sense here of society or indeed any other social collectivity as an external force. As Rob Stones puts it, the ‘external structural moment’ is ‘badly under-developed’ in Giddens’ ontology (Stones 2005: 58). In his own defence, Giddens argues that ‘In structuration theory, the concept of “structure” presumes that of “system”’: it is only social systems or collectivities which have structural

properties' (Giddens 1993, Introduction to 2nd edition: 7) but he is characteristically vague about attributing causal power to collectivities.

Giddens, then, seeks to break the connection between structure and society, while recognising that social collectivities are significant, but remains remarkably vague about what those collectivities might be or what sort of causal role they play. He can hardly be said to have successfully replaced Durkheim's notion of 'society' as the power behind normative social institutions. Yet that notion is plainly untenable. This situation invites two varieties of response. The first is to reject the entire Durkheimian tradition of thinking about structure. As Lopez and Scott point out, this has been the response of many postmodernists and poststructuralists who 'hold that there is no whole or totality separate from the *structuring* activities and practices that are engaged in by individual actors' (Lopez and Scott 2000: 5). But there are also critics of structural sociology who do not fall into the postmodernist camp.

John Urry, for example, argues that national societies are the central concept in traditional theories of structure and agency, which he calls a 'sociology of the social as society'; and wants to replace such theories with a 'sociology of mobilities' (Urry 2000: 4). He sees contemporary mobilities as undermining not only the idea of societies as congruent with nation states but as undermining any conception of social structure. And Bruno Latour is opposed to what he also calls a 'sociology of the social' – a sociology, for Latour, that takes 'the social' for granted, and a sociology that he specifically associates with the Durkheimian tradition. Latour aligns himself instead with Durkheim's opponent Gabriel Tarde and his advocacy of taking 'the social as a circulating fluid that should be followed by new methods and not a specific type of organism' (Latour 2005: 13). Latour wants to replace the 'sociology of the social' with a 'sociology of associations' (Latour 2005: 9), in which 'there is no society, no social realm, and no social ties, *but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations*' (Latour 2005: 108-9).⁴

⁴ Latour's alternative to structural sociology is examined in more depth in (Elder-Vass 2008c).

This chapter argues, however, that a second sort of response is preferable: a response that retains the conception of social structure but breaks the link to ‘society’ by identifying a different kind of social collectivity as the bearer of structural powers. In particular, it will be concerned with identifying the generic mechanism that is responsible for normative social institutions. In doing so, I will be following Latour’s advice to trace the associations at work, but instead of tracing these associations with a view to *substituting* them for a social structure, I will be tracing them with a view to *explaining* how that social structure works.

Norm circles

I argue that normative social institutions are emergent properties – causal powers – of *normative circles*.⁵ I have drawn the term *circle* from the work of Georg Simmel because he uses it to denote overlapping or *crosscutting* social groups. Indeed, Simmel named a chapter of his *Sociology* ‘Crosscutting social circles’ (Simmel 1955).⁶ Simmel applies the concept of intersecting social circles more often to questions of identity and solidarity than to questions of normativity, but his discussion of the codes of honour of some circles touches occasionally on the normative impact of intersecting social circles on their members (Simmel 1955: 163-6). This chapter goes beyond Simmel in seeing a specific kind of social circles – those concerned with specifically normative questions – as having emergent causal powers to influence their members, by virtue of the ways in which those members interact in them.

Let us consider, then, the case of a single social institution, in which a single norm tends to produce a single social practice. Part of the mechanism by which the practice is produced is that each member of the group that enacts this practice, which I shall call the

⁵ Some earlier papers referred to normative circles as *normative communities* (Elder-Vass 2007a; Elder-Vass 2008b). The concept of *community*, however, carries some of the same problematic connotations as *society*. My thanks are due to Margaret Archer and John Scott for pointing this out.

⁶ ‘Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise’. Although Bendix titled his translation ‘The web of group affiliations’, this decision has been criticised by Blau and Schwartz, and also by Frisby (Blau and Schwartz 1984: 1; Frisby 2002: 119; Simmel 1955: 125).

norm circle, holds a normative belief or disposition endorsing the practice.⁷ This does not necessarily entail that each member of the group is morally committed to the norm as representing a just standard of behaviour; it entails only that they are aware at some level that they are expected to observe it and will face positive consequences when they do so, or negative ones when they do not. The example abstracts from a variety of possible complexities by assuming a rather simple sort of social institution: one in which every member of the norm circle both endorses the norm and is expected to observe it. This enables us to ignore, for the purpose of clarifying the mechanism, features that would be important in a fuller account of normative institutions, most particularly the question of differences of social power between members of the circle and therefore the possibility that it could be used to enforce social practices that advantaged some at the expense of others.

The entity to which I am ascribing normative power in this argument is the norm circle and we can understand the *social institution* concerned as the causal power that this circle has to tend to produce the corresponding practice through the influence it exerts on its members. Like all causal powers in the critical realist model, normative institutions do not *determine* behaviour but only *contribute* causally to its determination, alongside other causal powers with which they interact, and hence they only *tend* to produce a given outcome (see chapter three). The parts of the circle, I suggest, are the individuals who are its members. But what is the mechanism by which the circle (as opposed to simply the individuals) generates this causal power?

Although institutions depend on the members of the norm circle sharing a similar understanding of the norm concerned, emergent or collective properties can not be produced by such formal similarities, as we have seen in chapter two. What makes a norm circle more effective than the sum of its members would be if they were not part of it, is the commitment that they have to *endorse and enforce* the practice with each other. The members of a norm

⁷ This is not in dispute between theorists of normative behaviour. It corresponds, for example, to Giddens' understanding of *rules* (Giddens 1984: 17-25). Nor is it necessary that these beliefs are held consciously or discursively by the individuals concerned; hence a similar role is played by Bourdieu's conception of the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990: 52-65; Elder-Vass 2007b).

circle are aware that its other members share that commitment, they may feel an obligation to them to endorse and enforce the norm concerned and they have an expectation that the others will support them when they do so. In other words, the members of a norm circle share a *collective intention* to support the norm, and as a result they each tend to support it more actively than they would if they did not share that collective intention.⁸

They may support the norm by advocating the practice, by praising or rewarding those who enact it, by criticising or punishing those who fail to enact it, or even just by ostentatiously enacting it themselves. The consequence of such endorsement and enforcement is that the members of the circle know that they face a systematic incentive to enact the practice. Not only will other individual members of the circle take an incentivising stance, but when they do so they will be taken to be acting on behalf of the circle as a whole and will be supported by other members of it. It is this commitment to endorse and enforce the norm that is the characteristic *relation* between members of a norm circle.

As a consequence of being members of a norm circle, then, these individuals act differently than they would do otherwise. Even if they held the same normative belief, they would not necessarily act in the same ways regarding it (either endorsing it so strongly or enacting it so frequently) if they were not part of a circle that shares a commitment to endorse and observe the norm. These relations, then, when combined with these sorts of parts, provide a generative mechanism that gives the norm circle an emergent property or causal power: the tendency to increase conformity by its members to the norm. The property is the institution and the causal power is the capability that the group has to affect the behaviour of individuals. That causal power is implemented *through* the members of the group, although it is a power *of* the group, and when its members act in support of the norm it is the group (as well as the member concerned) that acts.⁹

Now, this is not to deny any significance to the normative beliefs of the individuals concerned. Indeed, it is one of the strengths of the emergentist perspective that it accepts that

⁸ For a very clear introduction to the concept of collective intentionality, see (Gilbert 1990).

⁹ See the discussion of *intrastructuration* in chapter two.

entities at many levels of a laminated whole can simultaneously have causal powers and that these powers may interact to produce actual events. On this view, it is not only true that individual beliefs themselves are causally effective but also that they are a crucial part of the mechanism underpinning the causal power of the larger group. At the level of the individual, social institutions work because the individual knows both what the expected behaviour is, and the pattern of incentives their behaviour is likely to confront. These beliefs tend to encourage the enactment of the practice concerned; but they take the form they do at least in part because of the emergent causal effect of the norm circle. Individual beliefs, then, mediate between social institution and individual behaviour. Norm circles have a causal effect on beliefs, (and indeed on subconscious dispositions, as stressed in Bourdieu's account of the *habitus*) and these in turn have a causal effect on individual behaviour – reflecting the account of agency given in the previous chapter.

This, then, is a case of downward causation. But it is a significantly different form of downward causation than that discussed in chapter three. In that model, a whole with emergent powers (e.g. a living animal, with its emergent power to pump blood around its system) had a direct physical effect on its parts (e.g. moving its blood cells). But in social institutions the power of the norm circle to influence an individual member's behaviour is not a direct physical effect. Normative compliance is not physically forced compliance but voluntary compliance; and hence it is *directly* caused, not by the *existence* in the present of normative pressures from the community, but by the individual's *internalisation* of past pressures in the form of beliefs or dispositions. The effect of social institutions on behaviour is therefore a two-stage causal process – in the first stage the norm circle has a (downward) causal impact on the individual's motivations and in the second these motivations affect their behaviour.

The temporal gap between experience of the normative environment and the execution of a norm-compliant act is bridged by the retention of beliefs and dispositions shaped by this experience, and thus corresponds to the account of human agency given in chapter five. Institutions work, in other words, by changing individuals – by changing their

beliefs or dispositions so that the individual will be inclined to behave in a different way. Their causal effect is on our motivations, not directly on our actions, but by affecting our motivations at one point in time they are able to affect our actions later – an argument that echoes Archer's point that 'that structure and agency operate over different time periods' (Archer 1995: 76).

None of this implies, however, that normative institutions necessarily rest on evaluative *consensus*. The argument does entail that members of the norm group share a similar understanding of the norms they are expected to observe and the array of likely responses to their observation or non-observation of them. But there is no necessity that those affected by any given institution agree with the norm concerned in the sense of being *privately* committed to it as a just standard of behaviour. This therefore leaves open two important possibilities: (a) that conformance with norms may sometimes be a consequence of prudential behaviour in the face of unequal power relations rather than consensus over the value of the norm; and (b) that members of the norm group who disagree with its standards (even if they do actually conform with them) may take action directed towards changing those standards, thus initiating the morphogenetic cycle of structural (and indeed cultural) change analysed by Archer (Archer 1995: e.g. ch. 3, 192-4) – an issue that I will return to later in the chapter.

Nor does my argument entail that these institutional influences *necessarily* produce norm compliance. An individual's recognition of the social institution may produce a tendency to comply with the relevant norm, but because their behaviour like all actual events is multiply determined, other causal factors – such as other conflicting normative motivations, the belief that a norm could be transgressed without being detected, or strong emotional drives – interact with this tendency and may lead to it not being realised in any given target act. A parent may steal a loaf to feed his or her hungry children, for example, despite recognising the risk of being punished for doing so and even despite believing it is wrong to steal as a result of experiencing previous advocacy of this norm.

Furthermore, the existence of a social institution does not entail that all members of the normative circle concerned will actually endorse or enforce the norm on every relevant occasion: this sort of behaviour is also the outcome of many interacting factors, of which commitment to the norm is only one. Thus, for example, a member of the circle may fail to support a norm because they consider that there is another more important norm that needs to be supported in the particular circumstances, or because they are showing personal favouritism to an offender, or because they will obtain some personal benefit from a transgression of the norm by someone else.

The existence of a social institution, then, may not lead to enforcement of the corresponding norm on every occasion, but it does imply that there will be a *tendency* for members of the community concerned to endorse/enforce the norm. The institution produces a conditional tendency: *if* an individual transgresses against the norm, they are *likely* to encounter negative sanctions as a result.

This account of social institutions shares a great deal with Durkheim as well as with Simmel. As we have seen, he argued that ‘Society speaks through the mouth of those who affirm [its rules] in our presence: when we hear them, we hear society speak, and the collective voice has a resonance that a single voice cannot have.’ He also tells us that ‘social pressure exerts its influence mentally’, and that such influences ‘emanate from society’ (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 155-6). We need simply substitute ‘norm circle’ for ‘society’ and this would read as a summary of my own argument. Given Durkheim’s own emergentist leanings, well documented by Keith Sawyer (Sawyer 2005, chapter 6), this is not entirely surprising.

But this does not mean that *norm circle* is just a euphemism for *society*. This is not an unacceptable return to the ‘sociology of the social’, for at least two reasons. First, because there may be many norm circles in any social space, which can and frequently do intersect diversely with each other, and the consequence is that we can no longer take for granted any correspondence between a norm circle and any given social totality. Secondly, because now

we have an explanation of the *mechanism* by which the interactions between people *produce* the power of the whole.

Norm circle boundaries

One of the strengths of the norm circle concept is that it has no necessary congruence with conventional concepts of ‘society’. Once we reject the claim, implicit in some accounts of social institutions, that norm circles are coterminous with ‘societies’, then it becomes both possible and necessary to ask a new question: what *are* the boundaries of any given norm circle and how might we identify them empirically? There are at least three different approaches we might take.

First, we might say that for any given normative disposition or belief held by any given individual, the norm circle is the set of actual individuals who have influenced that disposition. This is what I propose to call the *proximal* norm circle. Each person has a proximal norm circle for each of their normative beliefs or dispositions – the set of people who influenced its formation. These proximal norm circles may be different for each distinct norm held by a given individual and will generally be different for each individual holding any given norm. In the extreme case, the proximal norm circle may be a single person from whom the individual has learned the norm – perhaps a parent or a teacher. In many such cases, however, this single person is taken to represent a wider group, which brings us to the second version of the norm circle concept.

This second version depends on the individual’s beliefs (conscious or otherwise) about the extent of the norm circle. I shall call this the *imagined* norm circle. Here I am adapting the concept of an *imagined community* that was introduced by Benedict Anderson to help explain the birth of modern nationalism (Anderson 1991). For Anderson, the national community is imagined because the individual member never sees the faces of most of its other members (Anderson 1991: 6). It is important to recognise, however, that *imagined* communities are not *imaginary*. What is imagined is not the *existence* of the community, but its extent: its size and its boundaries. The individual experiencing the attentions of a proximal

norm circle learns that they represent a wider group, but the extent of that group may remain obscure.¹⁰ Again, each individual has (at least implicitly) an imagined norm circle for each distinct normative belief or disposition.¹¹ There may, however, be a tendency for individuals to assume that their normative beliefs and dispositions all arise from congruent norm circles, or at least from a limited number of clusters of congruent norm circles. This suggests the concept of *norm-set circles*, which will be discussed in the next section.

Thirdly, we might seek to establish the network of inter-linked individuals who actually do endorse and enforce the norm concerned, irrespective of whether the individual has had any contact with them, as long as the individuals in his or her proximal norm circle are part of that wider network. I shall call this the *actual* norm circle. It comprises all those interlinked individuals who would in fact tend to endorse and enforce the norm concerned if they were to interact with the individual. This group may be either larger or smaller than the *imagined* norm circle for any individual holding the norm. Unlike proximal and imagined norm circles, however, the actual norm circle for any given norm is the same for all individuals within it. Nevertheless, there may be different actual norm circles for different norms.

Although these three versions of the concept of a norm circle are radically different, they are not in competition with each other: each of the three is causally significant and they play complementary roles in a single integrated process. It is the individual's interactions with the *proximal* norm circle, for example, that directly produce his or her disposition to act in conformance with the norm. Each of the members of this circle, however, has their own proximal norm circle, which may extend further into the actual norm circle, and we would expect all such proximal circles for a given norm to intersect to produce a patchwork that

¹⁰ Berger and Luckmann have described the process involved, but assume, following Mead, that it automatically leads to a recognition that *everybody* is committed to the norm (Berger and Luckmann 1971 [1966]: 152-3).

¹¹ The imagined norm circle may be subconscious, particularly when the norm itself is subconscious. The individual may subconsciously follow the norm in some contexts and not others, implying a non-universal subconscious imagined norm circle. Or they may follow it in all contexts, implying a universal one.

covers the whole of the actual norm circle. Each proximal norm circle, in effect, acts causally, but does so on behalf of the whole actual norm circle.

The *imagined* norm circle is causally significant because the presence (or consideration) of members of the imagined circle will tend to produce the individual's conformity with the norm. To the extent that the individual's acceptance of the norm is instrumental rather than internalised as a value, their adherence to it will depend upon the presence of members of the imagined circle. If someone believes, for example, that a particular norm is endorsed and enforced only by a religious community of which he or she is a member, they may be tempted to ignore it when no-one present belongs to that community.

And the *actual* norm circle is causally significant because it determines whether and when the individual will be subjected to the endorsement and enforcement of the norm, irrespective of the expectations about such endorsement that arise from their sense of the imagined norm circle. If it turns out in the previous example, for instance, that those endorsing the norm concerned extend beyond the individual's religious community, they may find themselves facing sanctions for their behaviour even though none of the members of their imagined norm circle is present. The extent of the actual norm circle, it should be clear, is independent of the beliefs about it held by any given individual. The two are ontologically distinct. One important corollary of this ontological separation is that the individual can be wrong about the normative environment that they face. Indeed, our empirical knowledge that people can indeed be wrong about their normative environment is further evidence for the ontological distinction between imagined and actual norm circles.

Exposure to unexpected sanctioning behaviour will, of course, tend to produce convergence of the individual's imagined norm circle towards the actual norm circle. In contemporary societies, however, we are only ever likely to encounter small portions of any given actual norm circle and individuals must develop working 'rules' based on their experience to give them a sense of the true extent of the actual circle. As a result, the mapping of our imagined norm circle onto the actual norm circle will always be approximate and imperfect. The degree of accuracy of this convergence will depend, *inter alia*, on the range of

the individual's experiences and normative education and on the quality of their ability to generalise from it.

Irrespective of the degree of convergence, however, I take it that the causal influence of the imagined norm circle is best understood as part of the way in which the actual norm circle acts upon each individual member of it. At the level of the individual's consciousness, the influence of the actual norm circle is mediated through two different forms. In the process of learning the norm, the individual is exposed to the influence of the actual norm circle through the mechanism of the proximal norm circle; and in the process of choosing whether and when to observe the norm, the individual is exposed to the influence of the actual norm circle through the mental image that they have of it: the imagined norm circle. Ultimately, normative social institutions are causal powers of actual norm circles, mediated through the forms of proximal and imagined norm circles.

The analytical distinction between imagined and actual norm circles does not in itself entail that they will be different in extent. It is possible, for example, that an individual may imagine the norm circles for all of her norms to be congruent with each other and that the actual norm circles for all of her norms actually are congruent. In such cases, there would be a single normative community responsible for all the normative influences on the individual, and indeed, at least at the level of actual norm circles, for all the normative influences on the whole of the community concerned. Perhaps in some pre-modern societies like those considered by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 2001 [1912]) this was sometimes the case. But once we recognise that the boundaries of norm circles are contingent and that they may differ for different norms, it becomes possible to conceive of a very different situation, which is surely characteristic of all but the most isolated of contemporary social spaces: normative intersectionality.

Intersectionality between normative circles

As I use the term, *intersectionality* is the property that a group has when it intersects with one or more other groups by virtue of having one or more (but not all) members in

common, or the property that a set of groups has when they intersect with each other. This is manifested at the individual level in the shape of people who are members of multiple groups simultaneously. As we have seen, this is a concept that has roots in the work of Simmel and variations of it have been used by a variety of sociological theorists. The most explicit use was perhaps that by Blau and Schwartz, in their book *Crosscutting Social Circles* (Blau and Schwartz 1984), but intersectionality is also, for example, a feature of Merton's account of reference groups (Merton 1968, e.g. p. 287) and Kadushin's work on elite power (e.g. Kadushin 1968). The concept has also long been a feature of feminist thinking and the term has recently become prominent in feminist discussions of individuals who experience multiple forms of oppression or marginalisation due to intersectional identities (see, for example, Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2005; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Walby 2007; Yuval-Davis 2006: 201). Most of these applications have focussed on intersectionality between what we might call identity groups and between common interest groups.¹² This chapter applies the concept to normative groups, but it could equally well be applied to groups of other kinds, such as linguistic communities (Elder-Vass 2008a), for example, and indeed Saussure touches on intersectionality in this context (Saussure 1986 [1916]: 200-201). As I use it, however, intersectionality goes beyond at least some of these other usages, in that it refers not just to intersections between nominal categories, but to individuals being parts of multiple distinct social entities with real causal powers.

Intersectionality between actual norm circles is possible because individuals hold multiple normative beliefs and dispositions, and there is no necessity that the actual norm circle that endorses and enforces any given norm should map onto (i.e. be congruent with) those for other norms that are held by the same individual. Any given person, in respect of *each* distinct belief or disposition they hold, is influenced by a given norm circle. It may, however, often be the case that these individual-disposition-specific-norm-circles are congruent for particular sets of linked dispositions for any one individual. Thus, for example,

¹² It may be useful to think of identity groups as *imagined* interest groups.

a member of a religious community may hold a cluster of normative beliefs that are endorsed and enforced only by that community. In such cases, I call the group that endorses and enforces this cluster of norms a *norm-set circle*. More generally, I shall use the term *normative circle* to refer to both *norm circles* for single norms and also *norm-set circles*.

Norm-set circles may be thought of in proximal, imagined, or actual terms, although once again I consider the actual variety to be the ultimate source of the other two. In proximal terms, particular groups of individuals (e.g. the family, or school friends, or teachers, or work colleagues) will often be the source, not just of single norms but of clusters of norms for any given individual. The individual is then likely to see each of these clusters as being endorsed by a particular imagined norm-set circle. Those endorsed by his or her family might be seen as belonging to whichever identity group the individual most strongly associates with their home environment – with a particular class or ethnic group, for example. Those (different) norms endorsed by teachers might be seen as belonging to the national community and those endorsed by work colleagues as belonging to the organisation in which they work.¹³

Alternatively, where these different clusters seem broadly consistent with each other, the individual might imagine them all as part of one large cluster, endorsed by society as a whole. Over the course of time, however, it is the actual rather than the imagined associations of norm circles into norm-set circles that will determine the responses the individual receives to their actions and so we would expect the individual's imaginings of normative clusterings to tend to converge (rather imperfectly) with the actual clusterings.

It is an empirical question, in any given case, whether (and which) groups of norms can be attributed to a norm-set circle, though we might expect such clusters to be common in the contemporary world, given that many of us are socialised through institutions like families, schools and religions that have wide normative ranges. To the extent that norm-set circles (and indeed any unclustered norm circles) are cross-cutting rather than congruent with

¹³ The argument does not rest on any assumption about *which* circles individuals belong to. Those who live outside families, with no formal schooling and no formal work, for example, may still belong to less conventional norm circles – composed, for example, of street gangs, or organised around institutional care environments.

each other, individuals become sites of normative intersectionality and *society* becomes a patchwork of overlapping or intersecting normative circles.

Once we recognise that individuals are members of a variety of cross-cutting normative circles, each of which tends to influence their behaviour in certain directions, it becomes apparent that these influences may not always be consistent with each other. My family, for example, may expect one thing of me and my class or work mates something quite different. A theory which simply argues that institutional pressures *determine* individual action is no longer tenable when institutional pressures may counteract each other; at best we can only argue that such pressures *tend* to influence action in certain directions. And once we recognise that multiple such pressures may conflict with each other, then we must recognise the need for individuals in ambivalent normative positions to make *decisions* about which norms to observe in difficult situations. Hence the importance of an understanding of human action that leaves room both for social influence and individual decision-making, or, to put it in other terms, that reconciles the roles of both *habitus* and reflexivity (see chapter five).

In contexts of complex normative intersectionality, skilled social performances depend upon the possession by the individual of a sophisticated practical consciousness of the diversity, applicability and extent of the normative circles in which they are embedded, and indeed of others to which they are exposed even though they may not be parts of them. Whether or not they are able to articulate this consciousness discursively, members of such societies depend upon it whenever they act.

Change in social institutions

We cannot make sense of social institutions without considering how they work over a short period of time and over such periods it is typically possible to abstract from the process of normative change. To put it more formally, in reproducing mechanisms we can abstract from morphogenesis. Normative change, however, is increasingly common and any adequate general theory of normativity must be able to accommodate *both* stability and change. It is beyond the scope of this book to theorise such change comprehensively, but

some brief considerations will help to illustrate the emergentist understanding of institutions and its dependence on a morphogenetic analysis – what Archer calls an ‘analytical history’ (Archer 1995: 327) – that complements the synchronic analysis developed above.

Archer and Bhaskar have provided complementary abstract frameworks for understanding changes in social structure: Archer’s morphogenetic cycle and Bhaskar’s Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA) (Archer 1995: 154-161). In both, the dynamic of structural reproduction and/or transformation is represented as a cycle with two critical moments. In the structural moment individuals are causally affected by pre-existing social structures and in the agential moment they themselves act, and as a consequence reproduce or transform the social structure concerned. This model maps straightforwardly onto this chapter’s account of stable social institutions: in the structural moment, the individual’s experience of norm-supporting behaviour by members of the normative community causally influences her motivations and in the agential moment she tends to act in compliance with the norm (and perhaps even to endorse or enforce it) thus reproducing the normative environment in which such behaviour is seen as desirable.

The same model, however, is capable of illuminating the process of institutional change, because this cycle is not a closed loop. At each point, subsequent actions are only influenced, and not completely determined, by the previous step in the cycle. Like all events, such actions are multiply determined – there are always other factors that interact causally with those modelled in the cycle of structural reproduction. Institutional reproduction does not require that at every turn of the cycle the agential moment produces behaviour supporting the existing institution, only that such behaviour tends to predominate to the extent required to sustain the normative beliefs of the members of the norm circle.

Now, these beliefs themselves depend not upon absolute consistency of our normative experiences, but upon the balance of confirming and dis-confirming experiences that we have. Consider the example of a tenant farmer renting land under an informal traditional tenancy agreement. If the tenant occasionally sees (or hears about) an ex-tenant begging in the streets and learns that he has been prevented from growing food for his family

because he failed to meet his obligations under such an agreement, this will tend rather strongly to confirm the tenant's belief that he'd better meet his own obligations. But if he meets his fellow tenants and hears them bragging about how they've short-changed their landlords and got away with it, he might start to develop a different belief about the incentives he faces and what is appropriate behaviour in the light of them. The net state of his belief about the need to observe the relevant norm will depend on the balance of such norm-supporting and norm-undermining experiences that has accumulated over time and how he currently evaluates them.

Because there are always reasons why *some* norm transgressions do not meet with norm-enforcing reactions (some examples of which were listed earlier), there is always a degree of uncertainty about the current normative environment, though with stable institutions the balance of support for the prevailing norms will tend to be clear enough for all competent members of the group to understand them. However, because it is possible for other factors to intervene causally in the agential moment, it is possible that the cycle reproducing any given institution may be subverted often enough for the norm to start to weaken, to fade away, or to be transformed. This can occur, for example, when the individuals concerned change their beliefs and/or behaviours for reasons that are external to the institution. There are many reasons why this could occur. For example, they might be exposed to normative beliefs from other circles and find them appealing, or their material circumstances might change in a way that means certain norms now seem unnecessary or counter-productive, or individuals may find that different norms endorsed by the same community lead to incompatible recommendations and find reasons for changing the order of precedence between them. Whatever the reason – and there may be several interacting reasons here too – once significant numbers of members of a normative circle change their behaviours with respect to a previously well-established norm, the normative environment is changed.

When this occurs, other individuals will find that their own beliefs about the normative environment have become outdated: the structure of normative incentives that they actually face is different from the structure they believe they face. One case of unexpected

normative behaviour, of course, is unlikely to change these beliefs, since as we have seen such cases are routine even when the environment has not changed at all. Just as it may take a series of experiences to persuade someone that a norm exists, it may take a series of experiences – or a particularly clear negative endorsement by an authoritative source – to persuade them that a norm they previously believed to apply to them has altered or ceased to apply. It is also possible, of course, for individuals to resist normative change, for example by strengthening their own norm-supporting behaviour to counterbalance the weakening of norm-supporting by others, and the net outcome will depend on the changing balance of these tendencies.

Opportunities for normative change are enormously enhanced in contexts of complex normative intersectionality. If the individuals in a given social space are all socialised with the same complete set of norms then the triggers for normative innovation are relatively limited – perhaps new kinds of situation may develop that call for new norms and perhaps tensions between different norms within the set may generate new normative thinking. In such contexts, the rate of normative change might be expected to be rather low. But where there are not only multiple sets of norms (for the same issue) within the social space but also large numbers of individuals who are subjected to pressures to conform with multiple sets, then the scope for normative change would seem to be higher. Individuals who are influenced by a number of normative circles may find it relatively easy to change their position on a particular normative question from that endorsed by one circle to that endorsed by another.¹⁴ By contrast, where a normative change would require the individual to leave a total normative community and join another, or would require the whole community to change its beliefs on a question, such changes seem likely to face greater inertia.

Reactions to normative change, of course, rest on being able to detect it in the first place. This requires the ability to distinguish normative change from everyday failures of people to support norms as and when we expect them to and from the dissonance resulting

¹⁴ Archer makes a similar point in discussing the ‘Myth of Cultural Integration’ (Archer 1996 [1988], chapter 1).

from exposure to norm-compliant and norm-supporting behaviour by members of different normative circles. A further source of normative dissonance for the individual arises when people make longer-term moves between one community and another with a different normative environment – from school to work, for example, or from prison to the outside world. In practice, people in modern societies are frequently exposed to all of these types of situations and develop good skills for distinguishing between the different cases. As Giddens puts it,

The reflexive monitoring of action is a chronic feature of everyday action and involves the conduct not just of the individual but also of others. That is to say, actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own; they also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move (Giddens 1984: 5).

It is only through such continuous monitoring and interpretation of the normative signals they receive from others that actors can cope with the highly intersectional and unstable normative environments that seem increasingly characteristic of the contemporary world.

This section has sought to show that the emergentist account of social institutions is entirely compatible with the explanation of institutional change as well as with the explanation of institutional stability. The account it has given of institutional change rests on two of the foundational principles of critical realist sociology. The first of these is Bhaskar's theory of multiple determination. No theory that sees social institutions as entirely determined by individual behaviour and individual behaviour as entirely determined by social institutions could account for change, since on such an account norms could never alter once they had been stabilised in a particular pattern. It is the recognition that individual behaviour is multiply determined, with social institutions entering only as one of many causal factors, that makes it possible for this model to accommodate behaviour that does not comply with or support the prevalent norms, and this in turn opens up the possibilities for institutional change.

The existence of non-compliant behaviour also opens up the possibilities for doubt and misunderstanding of the prevailing normative environment, and indeed for people to be wrong about that environment. Once we abandon any mechanistic notion that people's beliefs could be instantaneously transformed by changes in the normative environment, the possibility of changes in individuals' normative beliefs rests on a recognition that these beliefs could be out of step with the actual normative environment. Hence this theory of institutional change rests on a second foundational critical realist claim: the ontological distinction between social structures and people's beliefs about them.

Institutions and structuration theory

It is precisely this distinction that is the key point at issue between realist accounts of social structure and Giddens's structuration theory. Nevertheless, readers familiar with structuration theory will have detected some echoes of it in the argument above. This section will examine the relation between structurationist and realist accounts of structure, both as a contribution to the critique of structuration theory and in order to clarify the similarities and differences with my own argument. In a parallel to the discussion of agency in chapter five, this acknowledgement of similarities leads to the suggestion that there may be some scope for synthesis between the structurationist and realist traditions, though one that is premised on a rejection of certain key features of structuration's ontology.

The content of social structure, for Giddens, is *rules* and *resources*, which stabilise social practices and play a key role in their reproduction (Giddens 1984: xxxi). Perhaps the most contentious feature of Giddens' structuration theory is the claim that structure has no existence outside these practices and the minds of the human agents involved in its reproduction:

Structure is not 'external' to individuals: as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices, it is in a certain sense more 'internal' than exterior to their activities in a Durkheimian sense (Giddens 1984: 25).

Giddens' strategy for reconciling structure and agency, then, seems to allow some sort of causal effect to structure, but at the same time to deny a distinct ontological status for

structure by seeing it as 'virtual' except in those moments when it appears as a property of human individuals. As Cohen puts it, he seeks to account for the effects of groups while rejecting Durkheim's view that "social groups are entities *sui generis* with properties of their own" (Cohen 1998: 281-2). He explicitly rejects Durkheim's argument that structure can be seen as emergent and therefore as exercising a causal influence in its own right (Giddens 1979: 50-51). It would seem that he reconciles structure and agency, not as the distinct causal powers of inter-related types of entity, but as different aspects of human individuals.

Archer, like many other critics of Giddens (e.g Craib 1992) argues that Giddens' *duality of structure* conflates structure and agency as two sides of the same coin rather than two separate but interacting elements:

To treat 'structure' and 'agency' as inseparable is central to the notion of 'duality' [...] There is a decentring of the subject here because human beings only become people, as opposed to organisms, through drawing upon structural properties to generate social practices. There is an equivalent demotion of structure, which only becomes real, as opposed to virtual when instantiated by agency [...] If this is the case then its corollary is central conflation, for the implication is that neither 'structure' nor 'agency' have independent or autonomous or anterior features (Archer 1995: 101) (also see Archer 1982).

Archer argues that this *central conflation* of structure and agency 'deprives both elements of their relative autonomy, not through *reducing* one to the other, but by *compacting* the two together inseparably' (Archer 1995: 101). This can be contrasted with an emergentist ontology, in which agents and structures are distinct, though interrelated, and each may have causal powers in its own right.

Giddens has been defended by Rob Stones, who disputes the extent of the underlying differences between structuration theory and realism and argues that we should be working towards a productive synthesis of these two essentially compatible approaches, each of which has something useful to contribute to the study of structure and agency (Stones 2001: 177; Stones 2002: 223-4). This argument rests in particular upon a denial of the claim that Giddens rejects the distinction between structure and agency:

It is a different notion of dualism that Giddens rejects, the kind of dualism that sees structure as always entirely external to agency, in which structure is conceptualized as akin to the walls of a room and agency as akin to the space to move within the room. This kind of dualism is rejected because structuration theory conceptualizes structure as being partly within the agent as knowledgeability or memory traces. So the structure enters into the person (or corporate agent) such that we can say *both* that agency is a part of the person and that social structure is a part of the person. Structure, for Giddens, is something that is conceptualized as inhabiting people in the sense that it enters into the constitution of the reflexive and prereflexive motivations, knowledgeability and practices of people (Stones 2001: 184).

This, he believes, constitutes a denial of conflation, with the consequence that Archer ought to be able to accept structuration theory (and that structuration theorists ought to be able to accept emergence) (Stones 2001: 194-5). Indeed, he argues, ‘a reliance upon *duality within agents* already runs right through the morphogenetic approach, for example ... within the very idea of structural conditioning’ (Stones 2001: 184).

While I sympathise with Stones’ desire to synthesise the best from these two traditions, and his recognition of external structure is valuable, this argument still seems to beg the question of the status of ‘duality within agents’. I wonder whether this question arises partly because realists and structurationists are using the word *structure* in different senses when they read expressions like ‘structure as being partly within the agent’. Raymond Williams’ distinction (see chapter four) again seems potentially relevant: is it possible that realists are reading *structure* here as referring to the thing being structured (the whole building, in Williams’ example) and structurationists are reading it as referring to the structure *of* the whole? On the former (*strong*) reading, the idea that the whole structure could exist in someone’s head seems utterly incoherent; on the latter (*weak*) reading, the idea that what individuals have in their heads forms part of the structure of a larger social entity is much more plausible.

But the formulations deployed by Giddens and Stones seem at best ambiguous with regard to these two possibilities. Phrases like ‘social structure is a part of the person’ seem to encourage the strong reading, whereas those like ‘structure as being partly within the agent as

knowledgeability or memory traces' seem more open to the weak one. This lack of clarity arises, I suggest, partly because of persistent ambiguities with respect to two further distinctions: that between knowledge and the thing known, and that between composition and causation. Both can be detected in Stones' sentence 'Structure, for Giddens, is something that is conceptualized as inhabiting people in the sense that it enters into the constitution of the reflexive and prereflexive motivations, knowledgeability and practices of people' (Stones 2001: 184).

When Giddens argues that 'structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in ... practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents' (Giddens 1984: 17), he effectively reduces structure to knowledge. Because he takes knowledge to be part of the individual, it would seem to follow that structure is part of the individual in the strong sense. But this argument entirely neglects the first of the two stages through which norm circles influence behaviour in the account given in this chapter. Individuals do indeed have knowledge (or, more accurately, beliefs and dispositions) that embodies rules and influences their behaviour, but this knowledge is knowledge *of or about* or *produced by* the external normative environment faced by the individual. It is our knowledge of the structural influences we face (in this case the endorsing/enforcing practices of the normative circle) that exists as memory traces and not the structures themselves. By collapsing this external normative environment into the individual's knowledge of it, Giddens eliminates the structural moment in the reproduction of normative social practices. But there is an irreducible ontological distinction between (a) the existence of an actual norm circle and (b) any given individual's beliefs about it; a distinction that is lost in Giddens' account, making it impossible, as Archer says, to investigate the relation between the two (cf Archer 1995: 65-6).

The second ambiguity is to be found in Giddens' frequent use of the term *constitution*, which conflates causation and composition and obscures the distinction between the two. To say that structure 'enters into the constitution' of knowledge is move smoothly between the plausible *causal* claim that structure (in the sense of our external normative

environment) causes our normative beliefs and dispositions to the utterly untenable *compositional* claim that structure is therefore a part of us. Norm circles do have a causal effect on our normative beliefs or dispositions, but, to mirror an argument of John Parker's, the fact that structures are involved in the process of producing knowledge does not mean that these structures necessarily migrate to or inhere in their products.¹⁵ Things that cause effects do not thereby become parts of the things that they have affected. When I see a bicycle in the street, I don't end up with the bicycle in my brain, I end up with a *memory* of it in my brain. The same is true of my normative environment. If the bicycle knocks me over, this may stimulate a disposition to be careful when I see bicycles. In a very similar way, my experiences of my normative environment may contribute to altering my dispositions. But these dispositions are entirely distinct from the external things that have prompted them.

Despite these concerns over structuration theory's ontology, however, I do see some hope for reconciliation and synthesis, which arises if we can disarticulate structuration theory from Giddens's ontology. This chapter has argued that we cannot explain emergent social institutions without theorizing the mechanisms at the level of the individual that combine to generate them. If we read Giddens and Stones as making a contribution to a causal story about these mechanisms, there may be significant value in their *theory* even if we reject Giddens's *ontology*. On this basis, we may be able to find a theory of social institutions that both realists and structurationists could accept.

This chapter, I suggest, has constructed such a theory. In this theory, rules (or their near equivalents, norms) play a crucial role in the mechanism by which norm circles cause individuals to tend to reproduce certain social practices. They exist primarily in the form of knowledge (or its near equivalents – beliefs, or dispositions), a property of the individual concerned that shapes his or her behaviour. This knowledge, however, is a consequence of social interactions which take the form they do because of the existence of social groups that

¹⁵ In a critique of Giddens and Stones, Parker writes 'the fact that subjectivity is involved in the process of producing outcomes does not mean that this subjectivity necessarily migrates to or inheres in its products' (Parker 2006: 135).

are committed to interacting in support of those rules. These social groups therefore make a causal contribution to determining the actions of the individuals, a contribution that is mediated through the normative beliefs and dispositions of the individuals concerned.

Conclusion

The account of normative intersectionality given in this chapter gives a richer and more nuanced understanding of the complexities of normativity in the contemporary world than earlier understandings of social institutions as congruent with nation-state ‘societies’. Yet it does so without discarding the entire classical tradition of thinking about social institutions, unlike many other thinkers who have rejected the association of normativity with ‘society’. In doing so, it provides support for the argument that there are social collectivities – norm circles and norm-set circles – that exercise normative causal influences over the behaviour of individuals, influences that are mediated by each individual’s understanding of the normative environment within which they live. In a world of normative intersectionality, these influences are neither homogeneous nor hegemonic; the individual must sometimes negotiate a path that balances normative commitments that are in tension with each other. As intersectionality grows, then, it is not only the influence of diverse social forces that increases; so does the need for reflexive individual agency.

This explanation of the power of social institutions provides a strong argument against both methodologically individualist and structurationist ontologies of social institutions. Against methodological individualists, it shows that the normative force of social institutions depends upon the existence of a group that is bound together by certain characteristic relations and that this normative force can not be produced by individuals unless they are organised into this sort of larger whole. And against structurationists, it argues that this normative force depends upon the existence of a real group and not just on *virtual* structure – rules and resources as they are represented in the heads of actors.¹⁶

¹⁶ It is also a theory that is open to examination in empirical work. As in any case of applying abstracted theory to concrete cases, however, this will inevitably raise a number of further issues, both methodological and conceptual.

Normative social institutions, however, are far from being the only type of social structure, though they are an important one, not only in their own right but also because they are also implicated in other forms of social structure, in a complex hierarchy of inter-relationships. The following chapter will take the next step towards understanding this hierarchy by examining the case of organisations.

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